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SUBJECT: PM STANISHEV SAYS BULGARIA TO CONSIDER EXTENDING
TROOP PRESENCE, WATCHING CLOSELY U.S. POLICY REVIEW

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay KHalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Bulgarian Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev told the Ambassador December 12 that Bulgaria will decide in March whether to extend its troop contribution to MNF-I, following the ongoing U.S. policy review on Iraq. Stanishev sought the Ambassador's views on prospects for reducing sectarian violence, the stability of the ruling coalition, and the capacity of Iraqi security forces. The Ambassador reiterated that the U.S. Administration is carrying out a review of its Iraq policy, taking into consideration the report from the Iraq Study Group. He described the violence perpetrated by Al Qaeda- Iraq, the insurgents, and militias, which receive support from Syria and Iran. He asked PM Stanishev to encourage PM Maliki and other Iraqi leaders to make the difficult decisions needed for Iraq's success; and to focus efforts behind national reconciliation. End Summary.

12. (C) Accompanying PM Stanishev in his December 12 meeting with the Ambassador were Deputy PM and FM Ivajlo Kalfin, NSA Petko Sertov, MFA Chief of Cabinet Rayko Raychev, MFA Middle East Director Petko Doykov, and Ambassador to Iraq Valeri Ratchev.

Stanishev: Important to Hear U.S. Perspective

13. (C) PM Stanishev initiated the meeting by stating that he viewed his visit to Iraq as important for Bulgaria and for himself. His team had been following developments in Iraq closely, as well as the international debate -- particularly in the US -- on how to proceed. He noted successes in Iraq over the past three years, including the drafting and popular approval of a new constitution, free and fair elections, and the organization of a new government. At the same time, however, there remained many problems, particularly the marked increase in sectarian violence and Iraq's complex relationship with its neighbors. He wondered if the country was headed towards fragmentation. He stated that Bulgaria would be deciding in January about the continued status of 150 Bulgarian troops guarding the MeK at Camp Ashraf. The current mandate for this contribution ends March 31. As a coalition partner in Iraq, he stated, it was important to hear the U.S. perspective on the situation in Iraq. He also asked the Ambassador's view of the Iraq Study Group (ISG) report and the degree to which it would impact U.S. policy.

Ambassador: We Hope Bulgarian Troops will Stay

14. (C) The Ambassador expressed strong appreciation for Bulgaria's contribution at Camp Ashraf and for the bravery of

Bulgarian troops who had served in Iraq. He expressed strong hope that Bulgaria would extend their mandate, as the Iraqis continue to need help. Deputy PM Kalfin relayed that Bulgaria had participated in the coalition from the beginning. Turning to other issues, the Ambassador stated that President Bush is currently conducting a review of U.S. policy and would take the ISG report into consideration. However, the President is also seeking input from a wide range of other sources, including the UK and the Iraqis themselves. The Ambassador agreed with the PM about the multiple challenges in Iraq. We were having to build institutions, and more fundamentally a nation, in a difficult region in which some countries do not want Iraqi democracy to succeed. Iran and Syria were using sectarian violence to try to undermine coalition efforts in Iraq, through Iranian support for militias and Syrian willingness to allow terrorists to cross its border into Iraq. The Ambassador related that we are working to bring moderate political groups together to try to reach a constructive understanding of the future of Iraq. He also noted the importance of reconciliation, including through the planned passage of new legislation on de-Baathification and Hydrocarbons.

15. (C) The PM asked what the Iraqi view was towards international pressure. The Ambassador relayed that Iraqi public opinion had turned more negative the longer coalition troops had remained on the ground, but the government understands the security situation would be much worse if coalition forces were to leave too soon. That is why Iraq agreed to a rollover of the UNSC resolution on the MNF-I presence with a mandate until the end of 2007. He could not speculate as to whether there would be another rollover next year, noting that it would depend on the security situation. We were making progress in building up the Iraqi Army, with

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the goal of letting them take the lead with coalition forces in a support position. PM Maliki is urging that the process be speeded up. By the end of summer 2007, Iraq is scheduled to have control over its military forces in all the provinces. PM Stanishev asked the Ambassador if the Iraqi Army and Police were up to the job. The Ambassador replied that the IA is in better shape than the police, which in some places has been infiltrated by militia.

Militias, MEK, and Reconciliation

16. (C) The PM inquired which militia groups were of greatest concern to the U.S. The Ambassador stated the Jash al Mahdi (JAM) and rogue JAM elements that are not entirely under the control of Moqtada al-Sadr. The Ambassador added that we are pressing PM Maliki to deal with the militias, or the problem will become worse. PM Stanishev spoke of the importance of economic opportunities and jobs to make it more difficult for the militias to recruit young men. The Ambassador agreed, noting the important link between employment and security. PM Stanishev asked Iraq's perspective on the MEK. The Ambassador noted difficulty for the GOI as it cannot simply hand them over to Iran. The Iraqis are anxious for the MEK to leave Iraq as soon as possible.

17. (C) Stating that he would be seeing PM Maliki shortly, PM Stanishev asked the Ambassador what messages he should raise.

The Ambassador urged PM Stanishev to emphasize that it is important for Iraqi leaders to move forward in an active manner towards solving Iraq's problems, including dealing with militias and insurgents. He should also encourage Maliki to reach out to moderate countries in the region for support in Iraq and to move forward on national reconciliation, including on elements in the International Compact on Iraq.

KHALILZAD